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THOUGHTS

ON A

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM.

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1784

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THOUGHTS, &c.

THE great object of a parliamentary reform I take to be this, to procure a parliament totally independent on the crown and its ministers ; in which no member shall be intimidated by power, seduced by hopes, or
corrupted

corrupted by interest : this seems at present to be the chief pursuit of all our political doctors ; the grand specific which alone can cure all our national disorders, and restore our broken constitution to its original vigour.

ON this important subject two questions offer themselves for our consideration ; first, What are the most likely means to obtain such a parliament ? and secondly, What would be the effects of it if obtained ?

FOR

FOR the first, innumerable have been the schemes presented to the public by real and pretended patriots, that is, by those who have more honesty than sense, and those who have more sense than honesty. Some have been for shortening the duration of parliaments to three, and some to one year : some have recommended voting by ballot, as the most effectual method to put an end to bribery ; others have disapproved it as inconsistent with that open avowal which ought to accompany every act of a British freeman : some have proposed to annihilate

annihilate all the small and corrupt boroughs, and to add the same number of representatives which they now send to the several counties: some to add to the counties, and not to disfranchise the boroughs; others to abolish the boroughs, without any addition to the counties: some to enlarge, and some to diminish the qualifications of the electors; and others to require no qualification at all, but to allow every man a vote, who is not disqualified by nature, for want of reason, or by law, for the commission of some crime:

crime : but as very few have agreed in any one of these propositions, and no one has been able to form any satisfactory plan out of them all, I shall not here enter into any discussion of their merits, or make any comparison between them ; but shall only say, that of all these plans, that of giving a right of voting universally, together with annual elections, appears to be the most uniform, consistent, and effectual : it has indeed one capital defect, which is, that it is absolutely and utterly impracticable ; but I do not mention this as

an objection, so far from it, that I think it is its chief excellence, and is what induces me to prefer it to all the rest.

To be convinced of the impracticability of this scheme, let us but figure to ourselves multitudes of all descriptions and denominations called out to exercise their right of voting, inflamed by contest and intoxicated by liquor; laborers and manufacturers of every kind, above and under ground; weavers from their looms, and miners from tinneries, and coal-pits; failors

failors from their ships, and foldiers from their quarters ;—to whom we muſt add, thouſands of thieves, ſmugglers, rogues, vagabonds, and vagrants : I ſay, let us figure to ourſelves all theſe reſpectable electors let looſe in one day throughout every part of the kingdom, and ſuch a ſcene of confuſion, of drunkenneſs and riot, of rapine, murder, and conflagration, will preſent itſelf, as muſt ſhock us with horror, even in imagination.

NOR would it be poſſible to carry on, or ever to conclude elections
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in which the voters are so innumerable, and consequently so unknown. They must be polled in one of these two ways; they must either be admitted only to vote in the parishes to which they belong, or permitted to be polled in whatever place they happened, or chose to be at the time of the election: should the first of these methods be adopted, the acceptance or rejection of every vote might be attended with the trial of a settlement, and counsel learned in the law be heard on both sides; if the latter, crowds so numerous,

numerous, and so unknown to the candidates, and all whom they could employ to poll them, would press into every place, where money and liquor flowed in the greatest abundance, that the chief part of them might vote in ten different places, or ten times in the same place undiscovered ; and if these elections were annual, one could not be finished before the other began.

ANOTHER reason, which persuades me that this scheme is impracticable, is, that I cannot foresee

foresee any class of men whose interest or inclination would not induce them to oppose it: the landed gentleman would not much approve, that every pauper, gypsy, vagrant, and least of all every poacher, should enjoy as great a share in the legislature as himself; the city of London will never consent that every drayman, hackney-coachman, and chimney-sweeper, should be vested with as good a vote as the lord mayor and aldermen, nor the livery be desirous of admitting so numerous an addition to their respectable fraternity: the

the corporations throughout the kingdom, will never submit to have their consequence annihilated by a participation of their privileges with so innumerable a multitude; nor do I think that very multitude, or the people at large, would be extremely zealous to support it: at first, indeed, when they are told, that they shall all be legislators, obliged to obey no laws but of their own making, nor pay any taxes but of their own imposing, and that every one of them shall have as good a vote for a parliament-man as the squire

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or the parson, and recollect that this vote has ever been as good as ready money ; they will perhaps be a little elated and delighted with their new acquisition ; but when they are better informed, and understand, that the intent of this scheme is to prevent all bribery and corruption, and will preclude them from receiving one shilling or one dram of gin for their votes, they will reject this useless donation with contempt ; and there will not be a tinker, who will not choose rather to mend a kettle for six-pence, than
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the constitution for nothing, nor a laborer, who will not make faggots rather than laws, nor a pick-pocket, who will not prefer the exercise of his profession at an election to giving his vote.

BUT was this scheme of universal representation, or any other of the proposed plans of reformation practicable, and pursued, certain I am, that they would not in the least contribute to the great end, which is the formation of an independent parliament, because reason does not persuade

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me, that electors the most ignorant and profligate, the most necessitous and venal, would return members more incorrupt than the present ; nor does experience teach me, that ten or twenty constituents would chuse representatives less able or less honest than ten or twenty thousand. I am firmly convinced, both by reason and long experience, that no alteration in the mode of election, or in the electors themselves, would produce any change in the elected ; in them lies the source of the evil, which no external application can approach :

approach : whether they are chosen by a greater or a less number, by counties or boroughs, by the rich or by the poor, by ballot or by audible voices, the parliament, when assembled, will be just the same ; different modes of election may make some difference in the trouble and expence of the candidates, and may differently affect the morals of the people, and the peace of the country, but will make no difference in the representative body when brought together, and it is of little signification by what means they come there :

there : the majority of any legislative assembly, consisting of five hundred and fifty members, in the same circumstances and situation, will infallibly act in the same manner ; if their situations differ, their proceedings will differ with them. In the weakness of infant states, and in perilous times, they will be more intent on the safety of the community, because their own is immediately included in it ; but when the danger is removed, they will be more influenced by the views of interest and ambition, they will split into factions

tions and parties, and list under contending leaders, and sometimes prefer their interest or their own to that of their country. Their corruption will always increase in proportion to their power, because they have more to sell and are more necessary to be bought. Those who cannot make shift with such a parliament, must have none, because it is impossible for any mode of election, or species of electors, to choose a better, unless they could make men, as well as members.

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LET us now see what would be the effects of this independent parliament, if obtained. By an independent parliament, in the language of the present times, is to be understood a parliament in which the majority would oppose any administration: now no arguments are necessary to prove, that with such a parliament no public business whatever could be transacted, nor any government subsist. But it will be said, this is not what is wished for, but one in which the members shall be always ready to support the measures of ministers,

nisters, when right, and to resist them when wrong, unawed, and uninfluenced, and guided only by the dictates of their own judgment and conscience. This indeed is what every wise man would desire, but no wise man will expect to see, as no such assembly, if numerous, ever existed in this or in any country, from the beginning of the world to the present hour, nor ever can, unless mankind were melted down, and run in a new mould : as they are now formed, in every numerous assembly there must be some who have judgment,

judgment, and others who have conscience, and some who have neither : take away self-interest, and all these will have no star to steer by, but must fail without a compass, just as the gales of favour, or resentment, of popular absurdity, or their own shall direct them ; a minister therefore must be possessed of some attractive influence, to enable him to draw together these discordant particles, and unite them in a firm and solid majority, without which he can pursue no measures of public utility with steadiness or success,

cess. An independent House of Commons is no part of the English constitution, the excellence of which consists in being composed of three powers, mutually dependent on each other ; of these, if any one was to become independent of the other two, it must engross the whole power to itself, and the form of our government would be immediately changed. This an independent House of Commons actually performed in the last century, murdered the king, annihilated the peers, and established the worst

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kind

kind of democracy that ever existed ; and the same confusion would infallibly be repeated, should we ever be so unfortunate as to see another.

A NUMEROUS assembly uninfluenced, is as much a creature of the imagination, as a griffin or a dragon ; the one created by the poets, the other by ignorant or designing politicians. Parliaments have ever been influenced, and by that means our constitution has so long subsisted ; but the end and nature of that influence is

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perpetually misrepresented and misunderstood. They are seldom, very seldom, bribed to injure their country, because it is seldom the interest of ministers to injure it ; but the great source of corruption is, that they will not serve it for nothing. Men get into parliament in pursuit of power, honors, and preferments, and until they obtain them, determine to obstruct all business, and to distress government ; but happily for their country, they are no sooner gratified, than they
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are equally zealous to promote the one, and support the other.

UPON the whole, under the same mode of elections, and under parliaments not less influenced than the present, this nation has not only subsisted for many years, but arrived at the summit of wealth, honor, power, and dominion, and might still have preserved them, if the means of that influence had been sufficient to satisfy the demands of ambition, and the hunger of faction.

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But even now, if we survey the condition of every country on the globe, and compare it with our own, we shall find abundant reason to be contented: there are in it some evils, and much good, which is the utmost that any human institution will admit of. We have, indeed, too much oratory, too much liberty, too much debt, and too many taxes; but then we have plenty, and may have peace, if we please: we have security to our persons and properties, and excellent laws, justly, though not very cheaply administered; we have
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a parliament not worse, and a king
a great deal better than we de-
serve, and therefore I shall con-
clude with the words of Shake-
speare,

*'Tis better sure to bear the ills we know,
Than fly to others which we know not of.*



F I N I S.

